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Political communication in the (iconic) Trump epoch

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Abstract Whatever the result of the 2016 US presidential election, it will signal a new era of political communication. Candidate Donald Trump defeated 16 contenders in the Republican primaries, most of them Republican Party insiders. There are several reasons for this unexpected turn of events. One of them is the different kind of communication that Trump employs. Trump's communication method, like that of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) in Italy, uses a high number of icons (signs that represent objects by their similarity, such as images) instead of the indexes (signs that indicate their object by contiguity, such as tags, labels and proper names) that have characterised the last 20 years of political communication. This change encourages politicians to focus on communication as a 'complete gesture', and as a meaningful action that creates an ambience rather than stressing the role of the leader. This paper deals with the semiotic characteristics of this new kind of communication and explains the consequent key features of successful political communication in the coming years.

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Introduction

Whether Trump is the winner or the loser of the 2016 US presidential election, his campaign typifies the changes that are happening in political communication. Instead of demonising Trump or his campaign, we need to study him and it, and understand what is happening and what effect it will have on future political communication trends. Other phenomena, such as the Italian Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S), show similar trends from very different political premises. In order to accomplish this analysis, I will use some basic semiotic tools to look at several specific examples.

Three eras of political communication

Let us begin with a few basics of political communication. The Italian scholar Giovanna Cosenza divides the history of political communication into ancient, modern and post-modern epochs (Cosenza 2014). The names of these epochs might differ, but the tripartite periodisation is useful and I will analyse it by looking at the three main kinds of signs—icons, indexes and symbols. These respectively represent their object by similarity (such as an image or a sound), by mere connection (such as a label or a road sign) and by interpretation (such as a sentence) (Peirce 1992). How do these signs shape the history of political communication, and what is at stake in the changes taking place?

After the Second World War, politicians communicated through rallies that, from time to time, were broadcast on the radio. Obviously, the power of this kind of communication relies on words and on the way in which we pronounce them. Semiotically speaking, words are symbols, namely a type of sign that communicates its object through an interpretation that fosters a certain meaning. In order to understand symbols, one needs to know the language, the meaning of the words, and the subtle implications of irony, silence and implicit meaning. At that time, discourses were often complex, trying to encompass a complete vision of humanity and history. Slogans were the shortcuts used to make a final impression on voters. For example, in Italy, the sophisticated conceptual elements of Christian Democracy as a mixture of Christianity and liberalism, its ideas of democracy and opposition to monarchy, and its pro-US stance were summarised by the claim: ‘In the electoral booth God sees you and Stalin does not’. Thus there were symbolic shortcuts for symbolic discourses.

Television changed everything. Ever since the US presidential debate in 1960 between Kennedy and Nixon, the personality of the leader during debates, including his or her body language, smiles, grunts, looks and tempers, has been the focal point of electoral campaigns. What television made possible only occasionally before the war became the usual method of political communication. However, contrary to what one

might expect, this era of images was not an iconic era, but an indexical one. As much as images were important, they were at the service of a leader, the product on sale.

Television is one-directional: you cannot participate in the images it produces. A viewer receives them, and they work as a sign to indicate the person for whom the viewer should vote. The television era was the leader's era. From a semiotic standpoint, it was an indexical era, as indexes are those signs that represent their object through a mere connection. Even if images were central in this kind of communication, their role was to ground the indexical emergence of the leading characters. A former actor became one of the most effective presidents of the US (Ronald Reagan), while another former actor and playwright became one of the most important popes in history (John Paul II). As the perfect closing to this era, another famous actor became governor of California (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and the owner of a television company became prime minister of Italy (Silvio Berlusconi). This form of communication did not cancel out the importance of discourses. However, they increasingly became secondary elements in comparison to the focus on the personality of the leader. Parties lost their importance, giving way to the personalisation of politics. Following a leader became more important than the leader's ideas. Personalisation went as far as political posters that presented only the face and the name of the leader. In Italy, political parties incorporated the names of their leaders into their logos. Followers wore the names of party leaders on their t-shirts and gadgets.

A new era opened with social network campaigning. From US President Barack Obama's first campaign to today, the possibility of sharing everything in real time and responding interactively has shifted the focus from the leader to emotions and feelings. Whether cries, anger or love, all sentiments can now be displayed and shared in a few minutes all over the world. To combat obesity, Obama shared his passion for basketball and his wife Michelle did the same with regard to exercise and nutrition. The Pope broadcast his entrance to the Apostolic Palace while commenting on how his riches were to be given to the poor. The new mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, showed herself crying while receiving the news of her victory.

In conjunction with these sorts of events, ordinary people can now participate by commenting, responding and sharing through social networks. This new intimacy with emotion and simultaneous participation indicate a move to iconic communication. Icons are signs that represent their object and communicate meaning by their similarity to objects. Tears represent sadness or sudden joy, videos represent real activity that is going on, and gestures often represent what we are saying visually, while sounds and music do the same acoustically.

Obviously, this is an oversimplification. The tone of the voice on the radio was an iconic element in the discursive epoch and the name of the leader has always been important in politics. Suits and smiles were iconic elements in the televisual epoch, which has always included discourses as well. Gadgets and personalised items are still important today. In language itself there are indexical and iconic aspects, hidden below the symbolic surface. Proper names are indexes and onomatopoeic sounds or

nicknames are icons. In a sense, all three kinds of signs—icons, indexes and symbols—have always been used in political communication. However, epochs differ insofar as the prevalence of one kind of sign. My claim is that Trump's campaign, as well as other current political phenomena signal a decisive passage from the indexical to the iconic era in political communication.

Before reviewing the reasons for this claim, I want to specify the features of these kinds of signs. Symbols are the glory and the curse of humanity. Symbols permit language, reasoning and discourse. They are very precise and very cold. They call for reasoning and, of course, they are so plastic that they can form complete ideologies.

Indexes work like labels on a bottle or on the shirts of football or basketball players. They are only precise in identifying a 'mere connection' or, in psychological terms, a belonging. They do not need interpretation or reasoning. They indicate as the finger does; there is a connection between the index finger and the object, but the connection is the only thing that one wishes to communicate. Road signs are indexes, as are obelisks. According to the American founder of semiotics, Charles S. Peirce, the obelisk is an index insofar as it only says: here! 'Here' is the place in which the power is located (Peirce 1998, 163). As mentioned above, proper names and pronouns are the parts of language that work as indexes. As sport fans and lovers know, the power of indexes lies in their repetition. Yelling the same name for hours on end makes that initial mere connection stronger and therefore more meaningful.

Icons are vague and it is in this vagueness that their power lies. An image of a politician who is crying or of the Pope punching an imaginary adversary does not convey exactly what the person represented means. However, icons start the engine of imagination. They are connected to the object in a direct way, but not through brute or mere connections. They refer to the object insofar as they bring the object to be within them. They are not the object, but they are as close as possible to it. That is why icons are not cold. They cause an immediate reaction to the object, affecting the tone of the relationship much more than any other kind of sign. They do not specify exactly what meaning they want to convey. Technically, this vagueness means that two contradictory possibilities can be understood at the same time. Icons are very suggestive and they contain an enormous number of possibilities.

Trump and the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle)

Before his nomination as the 'Grand Old Party' candidate for election to the presidency of the US, Donald Trump defeated 16 contenders, most of them backed by Party mainstays who did not want to surrender to Trump. The excuse that Trump's triumph was entirely due to money is out of place in this case, since all the candidates spent enormous amounts of money on their campaigns. Even the argument that it was the result of the enormous TV coverage of his campaign does not work: many Fox News pundits,

who are traditionally close to the Grand Old Party, preferred other candidates. Trump's communication mode has proven to be unstoppable and surprisingly marketable.

Trump communicates with his audiences in a different way, an almost completely iconic way. He reacts to any news without political mediation and political correctness. He gesticulates with his answers and his face reveals his feelings—he is often seen frowning or upset. He yells, he mimics adversaries and he calls them names. He is as harsh towards his opponents as he is warm and captivating to his followers. He uses love–hate language and he mainly communicates in a direct way, through social networks. As is well known, he does not provide clear statements about complex political issues and he often changes his mind. And he seems to know that he does this, admits to it and continues regardless.

In parallel, the growing Italian anti-system Five Star Movement, while holding very different political views to Trump, uses the same semiotic tools. Grounded in claims of political morality and strict obedience to the law, M5S unites leftist egalitarianism with anti-EU and anti-immigrant statements. The founders of the movement were the comedian Beppe Grillo and the media expert Roberto Casaleggio. The movement claims that the Internet allows us to live in a direct democracy, and members of the movement vote on many political decisions. Candidates for political office are decided by online vote, sometimes by just a few members of the online community. Regardless of any internal democracy, members of parliament who do not adhere to the party line are expelled. In addition to the use of the Internet, Beppe Grillo holds powerful and effective rallies all over the country. He often changes his mind on topics, including the adoption of step-children, surrogacy, immigrants and, more recently, the EU. Grillo's rallies and shows are emotionally powerful. He yells at his enemies, mimics them and calls them names. He dispenses love for attendees and hatred for the press and his political adversaries. Grillo talks always of community and of an atmosphere of reciprocal care, even when there are several thousand people in the audience. When the movement gained a large number of members of parliament in 2013, Grillo did not want them to form a coalition with other parties.

In the semiotic terms I mentioned above, Trump and Grillo are iconic politicians. They exploit emotions and images. Gesturing and mimicking are only part of this. Their word choices are often full of images, vulgarity and name calling (which insofar as it is used to describe a quality or circumstance of a person is iconic). In other words, while Berlusconi 'sold' his name as an index and all the other politicians in Italy followed suit, Trump and Grillo are shaping an iconic era in which you do not vote for the leader with whom you identify, but for a community shaped by a certain atmosphere. You do not know whether she is right based on reasoning (as in the symbolic era); you do not trust the leader whatever she says (as in the leader/indexical era); but rather you feel that she is right insofar as she is sincere and makes you feel cared for (the iconic era).

The positive aspect of the shift that we are witnessing is that icons are closer to their objects. People are weighing up whether or not the politician is sincere. It does not matter if what he says is highly questionable or if he changes his mind. People believe what

he says because everything is, or looks like, it flows from the heart and from experience of real life. In this way, we are getting closer to the kernel of communication—that you have to believe what you communicate. Contrary to what is often said, ideologies still exist but they are shaped in an emotional way, which is easier to approach and to talk about, or to oppose, if you know how to communicate. By their nature, icons allow suggestion and open up possibilities. There is less of the rigidity that often shaped the two previous eras of political communication.

The negative aspect, of course, is that there is less reasoning too (there are fewer symbols) and, therefore, less room for compromise. Sincerity also requires adherence to the character one has shaped. In an interesting interview about a trial he has to face next December, Trump says he could have settled, but he is not ‘known as a settler’ (at rally in San Diego, reported by CNN; Bohn 2016). In Italy, Grillo refuses to form an alliance because M5S cannot be seen to be like any other party.

Parallel changes

This iconic form of political communication goes hand in hand with two other changes: the arrival of Web 2.0 and globalisation. The existence of Web 2.0 is crucial to the speed of communication that the iconic epoch requires. Emotions come and go rapidly, and politicians cannot be late to any discussion. While in the epochs of leaders’ political communication and discourse political communication it could take hours or days to establish the correct interpretation or the leader’s will, iconic political communication happens in seconds. Speed is granted by the social networks and by the highly conflictual discussions that they allow.

The other aspect of the passage to iconicity in political communication is the system/anti-system dialectic. This second crucial pillar of the change shows that globalisation in the market and politics is very good for some groups of people but is highly questionable for a vast number for whom wealth, welfare and social opportunities have decreased as a result of the huge economic crises of the last 10 years. Iconic communication has tended to transform all of these people into one ‘community’ of the excluded and has prompted the call for local communities in which life would be better or more bearable. The pleas for universal values and reasoning, as well as globalisation, are no longer fashionable for those who have found these ideas to cause havoc and deceit in their day-to-day lives.

In any analysis like the one presented here, the question of ‘what came first’ arises. Was Web 2.0 the cause of the change we are looking at, or was it the unbearable changes in the financial markets that pushed the wheels of change? Or was it the signs themselves that changed attitudes towards the markets and pushed people to use the web differently?

This question reveals the usual weakness of analytical reasoning. Things happen simultaneously and there is no absolute first, because inventions, social attitudes and markets are all part of the broad development of communication that shapes reality.

Conclusions

The latter consideration pushes me on towards conclusions. What can we learn from Trump and Grillo? Assuming that a change towards iconic communication in politics is taking place, what should we do? Could any politician become a professional comedian and could a not-naturally gifted politician become a natural iconic communicator? Of course, neither is a good solution.

The first outcome of any analysis such as this is awareness of the situation. History has no guarantees, and things can change. However, at this time, we are facing this change and politicians must realise that the old language of discourse is out of date. In addition the era of the leader is fading. The language of community; care for the common person; and the use of social networks, not for manipulative communication but for shared communication, are on the rise. You cannot ignore this mounting tide of communication. Ignoring it would risk creating two worlds of communication, as happened with the Brexit referendum. The cultural economic elites in Britain were convinced that Britain would vote for Remain. They did not realise that the experts' long discourses were not reaching the other world, where emotional iconic arguments were suggesting another option. A similar thing happened in the recent Italian administrative elections, when the governing parties did not expect M5S to win in cities such as Rome and Turin, where the establishment candidates were stung by the election of young representatives of the Movement. Of course, the same happened in the Republican primaries, where opponents and TV broadcasts could not forecast or prevent Trump from winning.

Every politician should at least recognise that today political communication requires some iconic elements. It does not require a complete change from one's own traditional ways, but it does require at least an acquaintance with the iconic world which we are undeniably entering. This means that social networks cannot be used for manipulative communication but that, even if manipulation is desired, individuals must be very careful to also share themselves, their world and their feelings. In a word, they must be, or look, sincere. A politician needs to embrace personal communication as far as social networks, advertising, TV messages, rallies and posters are concerned. Obama's early use of social networks, Grillo's rallies and Trump's controversial attitude to the press show that standardised communication, in which one has a little bit of everything, is over. Moreover, the audience of reference is no longer tied to a party or to a particular territory, but to a community, which is always 'glocal'—global as far as places are concerned; local as far as common interests are concerned.

Summing up, politicians have to recognise that political communication is a complex 'gesture', that is, a determinate action that 'carries on' a meaning (from *gero*, Latin for 'carry on') (Maddalena 2015). When it is a successful gesture, all kinds of signs are

mixed up together. Post-Trump, nobody should ignore the fact that any gesture in political communication also needs an iconic, imaginative, suggestive and communitarian hue.

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